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THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN TRIBES¹

By JOHN R. SWANTON

The majority of works published during the last thirty years that attempt to deal with the social organization of "primitive people" have been dominated by the totemic clan theory, i. e., the theory that in the earliest period of their development all tribes consisted of certain divisions or clans which practically took the place of families, and the members of each of which were compelled to marry into some other. This theory furthermore supposes that the offspring of such marriages always belonged to the clan of the mother, and that where we find the reverse condition it is a later development. An important adjunct of the clan is the totem — an animal, plant, or other object from which each clan derived its name and many of the members their personal names, and to which the members were supposed to stand in some mystic relation indicated usually by prohibitions or tabus.

It has been especially advocated by students who hold that the monogamous family was not a primitive institution but has been evolved from a stage in which sexual relations were more or less promiscuous, the line of ascent leading through stages in which a group of men were married to a group of women (group marriage), in which one woman was married to several men (polyandry), in which one man was married to several women (polygamy), in which one man and one woman paired for a certain period (the pairing family), until finally the true monogamous family was reached. But although this theory of marriage has been very successfully assailed by Westermarck² and later writers, the totemic clan theory itself has effected such a lodgment in popular favor that it is now

¹ Presented at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Berkeley, California, August 31.

² Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, 1891.

referred to casually as to one of the well-established principles of modern science. Constantly there are let fall such expressions as "traces of maternal descent," "relics of a previous maternal state of society," "customs showing the change from a maternal to a paternal condition," as if nothing were better recognized.

In the present paper I shall endeavor to determine how far the organization of American tribes north of Mexico, so far as we know it, bears out this theory, not pretending to pass final judgment on it as a whole. I am especially moved to this by the fact that the theory is thought to have been confirmed through material brought from this very quarter by an American ethnologist, Lewis H. Morgan,¹ and all the more that no specific objection to his conclusions has appeared in print. The material for such a paper is so readily available, however, that no special credit is involved in merely assembling it. It should be said in the first place, with reference to Mr Morgan's work, that data were so much more scanty in his time, especially from that very region which confirms the clan theory least, that his conclusions are not altogether surprising. Had he begun by studying western instead of eastern tribes they might have been different.

While seemingly simple, the question of the truth or falsity of the hypothesis under consideration is found to contain several subordinate questions, all of which need not be answered in the same way. Thus we can conceive of descent as reckoned through the mother without the existence of clans, of a clan system in which the clans are without totems, and of one in which, while totems exist, there are no special tabus, names, or rites accompanying them.

Conforming in some measure to the type of organization assumed in the maternal clan theory are the five tribes of the Iroquois confederacy,² the Tuscarora,² Wyandot,³ Cherokee,⁴ Delaware,⁵ Mohe-

¹ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 1878.

² Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 1878.

³ Powell in *First Rep. Bur. Ethnol.*, pp. 59-69.

⁴ Mooney in *Nineteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 212.

⁵ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 171; Brinton, *The Lenape and their Legends*, pp.

gan,¹ Tutelo,² the Muskhogean tribes so far as known,³ Timucua,⁴ Yuchi,⁵ Natchez,⁶ Biloxi,⁷ tribes of the Caddoan confederacy,⁸ the Pueblos,⁹ Navaho,¹⁰ Apache,¹¹ Haida,¹² Tlingit,¹² Tsimshian,¹² Heiltsuk,¹² Takulli,¹³ Tahltan,¹⁴ Knaikhotana,¹⁵ and Kutchin.¹⁶

This number would probably be considerably increased if we had accurate information concerning many tribes which are now extinct. Thus it is a fair inference that the remaining Iroquoian tribes — the Erie, Neutral Nation, Susquehannock, and Nottoway — were organized like those that are known to us, and that the remaining eastern Siouan tribes were organized like the Tutelo. Our knowledge of the latter depends mainly on the statements of two or three survivors of the Tutelo interviewed by Hale and Dorsey, after the remnant of their tribe had been living for years with the Iroquois, whose strong clan system is well known. The main fact, however, is confirmed by Lederer in the following words :

“ From four women, viz., Pash, Sepoy, Askarin and Maraskarin, they derive the race of mankind, which they, therefore, divide into four tribes,

¹ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 173.

² Dorsey in *Fifteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 244.

³ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, pp. 160-163; Gatschet, *Creek Migration Legend*, I, 1884, pp. 153, 156.

⁴ Gatschet in *Proc. Am. Philosophical Soc.*, XVII, no. 101, p. 490.

⁵ Gatschet, notes.

⁶ Du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, II, pp. 393-405.

⁷ Dorsey in *Fifteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 243.

⁸ Mooney in *Fourteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 1093.

⁹ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, pp. 178-180; Fewkes in *Nineteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*; Matilda Coxe Stevenson in *Eleventh and Twenty-third Reps. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*

¹⁰ Matthews, *Navaho Legends*, pp. 29-33.

¹¹ Bourke in *Jour. Am. Folk-lore*, III, pp. 111-126. Hrdlicka, however, it should be noted, denies that the San Carlos Apache have clans. See *Am. Anthropologist*, VII, no. 3, p. 481.

¹² Boas in *Fifth, Tenth, and Twelfth Reports on N. W. Tribes of Can. for B. A. A. S.*, 1889, 1895, and 1898; Boas in *Rep. U. S. Nat. Mus. for 1895*, pp. 322, 323.

¹³ Morice in *Trans. Can. Inst. for 1892-93*, p. 203; *Proc. Can. Inst. for 1888-89*, pp. 118, 119.

¹⁴ Callbreath in *Ann. Rep. Geol. and Nat. Surv. Can.*, n. s., III, pt. I, 195B; also Morice, op. cit.

¹⁵ Richardson, *Arctic Searching Exped.*, 1851, p. 406; quoted by Bourke in *Jour. Am. Folk-lore*, III, p. 122, 1890.

¹⁶ Hardesty in *Ann. Rep. Smithsonian Inst. for 1866*, p. 315; Petitot, *Traditions Indiennes du Canada Nord-ouest*, 1886, pp. 14, 15.

distinguished under those several names. They very religiously observe the degrees of marriage, which they limit not to distance of kindred, but difference of tribe, which are continued in the issue of the females: now for two of the same tribe to match, is abhorred as incest and punished with great severity.''¹

At the same time it would seem as if totems were wanting.

On the authority of a Narraganset woman living in Kansas and the supposed relationship of the Narraganset to the Mohegan, Morgan² assumes that the tribes of southern New England were organized similarly; and from another single statement, attributed to Powhatan, regarding the descent of the chieftainship which he held, it is supposed that the same was true of the Algonquian tribes of eastern Virginia.³ These suppositions also have probability in their favor, but the small ground on which they stand should be kept in mind.

On the other hand the social organization of several of these tribes does not altogether square with the clan formula. Thus the Delaware consisted of three exogamic divisions called by Morgan Wolf, Turkey, and Turtle, but properly known as Munsee, Unami, and Unalachtigo, names which signify, respectively, "people of the stony country" or "mountaineers," "people down the river," and "people who live near the ocean." Commenting on this fact, Brinton says:

"These three divisions of the Lenape were neither 'gentes' nor 'phratries,' though Mr Morgan has endeavored to force them into his system by stating that they were 'of the nature of phratries.' Each was divided into twelve families bearing female names, and hence probably referring to some unexplained matriarchal system. They were, as I have called them, sub-tribes. In their own orations they referred to each other as 'playmates' (Heckewelder).''⁴

The twelve subdivisions of each major section in later years are said to have taken on the character of clans, but it is to be noted that they lack totemic names, and this fact, together with the geo-

¹ Lederer, *Discoveries*, 1672, p. 8.

² Morgan, *Ancient Society*, pp. 173, 174.

³ John Smith, *Works*, Arber ed., pp. 81, 376.

⁴ Brinton, *The Lenape and their Legends*, p. 40.

graphical character of the three main divisions, differentiates the tribe very strongly from the Iroquoians and Muskhogean. This same local character is noted by Matthews and Bourke for the clans of the Navaho and Apache, respectively, and by Boas and the writer regarding all the minor divisions of the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian.

Du Pratz, our only authority on the Natchez, informs us that their exogamous divisions corresponding to clans were different social strata and therefore really castes, and they appear to have been without totemic names. An analogy to this state of affairs is furnished, very curiously, by an Athapaskan tribe, the Kutchin, living on Yukon and Porcupine rivers, Alaska. They are said to consist of three exogamous bands or camps which occupy different sections of country and differ in rank, the children always belonging to the band of the mother; but the divisions lack totemic names. Of the other Athapaskan tribes of the far north we have the very best authority, that of Morice, for the statement that the Carriers and Tahltan (or western Nahane) have adopted their clan systems from the coast, and the reported clan system of the Knaiakhotana, from the description given of it, would seem to have arisen similarly. In the same way Boas indicates that the Heiltsuk, now in the maternal stage, have adopted their present organization from their northern neighbors. Even the three most pronounced maternal tribes of the north Pacific coast—the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian—present anomalies in the fact that their larger totemic divisions extend into nearly all the towns occupied by each tribe and rather correspond to the phratries of other tribes than to clans proper, while the smaller divisions are, as I have said, rather to be considered as geographical groups.

Yet even among tribes which present this organization in its most typical form it would appear that the authority of the clan has been greatly exaggerated and the power and importance of the father's clan placed at a too low value. Thus, according to information kindly furnished by Mrs Matilda Coxe Stevenson, among the Zuñi land is owned by families, not by clans. With the same people a man is practically prohibited from marrying into his father's clan as well as into that of his mother; he is known as the

"child" of his father's clan, and certain offices are always held by the "child" of a special clan, thus bringing about a rude kind of paternal descent. The same abhorrence to marriage into the clan of one's father exists among the Navaho according to Matthews,¹ and among the Iroquois according to Hewitt.

Organized on the basis of gentes, i. e., exogamic divisions with descent through the father, are the Abnaki,² Ottawa,³ Potawatomi,³ Chippewa,³ Menominee,⁴ Sauk and Foxes,⁵ Miami,⁶ Shawnee,⁷ Kickapoo,⁸ Blackfeet,⁹ Omaha,¹⁰ Ponca,¹⁰ Winnebago,¹⁰ Iowa,¹⁰ Oto,¹⁰ Missouri,¹⁰ Osage,¹⁰ Kansa,¹⁰ Quapa,¹⁰ Yuman tribes,¹¹ and Kwakiutl.¹² It has been asserted that traces of a previous maternal condition are found in many of these, especially the tribes of Algonquian lineage, and a change such as that implied is of course quite possible; but the arguments that Morgan adduces in proof are too fragmentary to be conclusive, and for the Siouan tribes it is a pure assumption. The only western Siouan tribes claimed as possessing clans with maternal descent are the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Crows, and I think that the real state of affairs among those tribes has been misunderstood. In the first place the subdivisions of these three tribes are not totemic and should evidently be regarded as bands rather than clans. Secondly, it was customary among very many American tribes, no matter how each was organized internally, for a man marrying outside to live with his wife's people, and in such cases his children would remain with her. At the same time he might equally well marry inside of his tribe or band and be succeeded by his son in whatever position he had attained. This

¹ *American Anthropologist*, vi, 758, 1904.

² Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 174.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 167; James in *Narrative of the Capture and Adventures of John Tanner*, 1830, pp. 313-316; Warren in *Minn. Hist. Soc. Coll.*, v, pp. 41-53.

⁴ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 170; Hoffman in *Fourteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, pp. 41-44. Hoffman states that the organization was formerly maternal, but quotes no authorities, native or white, except a very much qualified statement of Mr Sutherland in *Coll. Hist. Soc. Wisconsin*, x.

⁵ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 170. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168. ⁷ *Ibid.* ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁹ Grinnell, *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*, pp. 208-225.

¹⁰ Dorsey in *Fifteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, pp. 226-241.

¹¹ Bourke in *Jour. Am. Folk-lore*, 11, pp. 180-181; Kroeber in *American Anthropologist*, iv, p. 278.

¹² Boas in *Rep. U. S. Nat. Mus. for 1895*, p. 334.

Hewitt ascertained from some Crow Indians to be the state of affairs in that tribe, and, since they have separated from the Hidatsa in comparatively modern times, it may be assumed for the latter also. Nor is there good reason for thinking that the organization of the Mandan was different. Through mistakes of this kind many tribes have been assigned to a clan or gentile stage when the subdivisions which they possess are neither clans nor gentes; and for this reason it is preferable to accept the authority of Mooney¹ regarding the social organization of the Cheyenne rather than that of Grinnell.² Of the subdivisions of this tribe only two present features at all suggestive of totemic clans, while one, the Sutayu, is known to have been formerly an independent tribe, and it would be absurd to suppose that it was then exogamic. In the case of the Blackfeet, Grinnell is our best authority, and I have followed him, but, inasmuch as he states that marriages now take place within the "gens," I am inclined to question whether they did not in ancient times as well. At all events these divisions are evidently not totemic, and the same is true of the Kwakiutl gentes, which are called after reputed ancestors or else by some grandiloquent term referring to their power and wealth.

In discussing the organization of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Crows I have indicated a type of organization in which, while there may be tribal subdivisions, these are not exogamic, lack totems, and hence cannot be called either clans or gentes. In this type the family, although it may be a polygamous one, is the basis of the state, and property, authority, and emoluments either descend or tend to descend from father to son. In this category may be placed the Shoshonean,³ Salishan,⁴ and eastern Athapascan⁵ peoples, the

¹ Mooney in *Fourteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 956.

² Grinnell in *Proc. Internat. Cong. Americanists*, 13th sess., N. Y., 1902, pp. 135-146.

³ The Shoshonean organization has been referred to specifically by very few writers, but that it was of this type, omitting the Hopi of course, may be inferred from everything that can be learned about it. For the Comanche, however, see Mooney in *Fourteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 956.

⁴ Boas in *Reports on N. W. Tribes of Can. for B. A. A. S.* for 1889, 1890, 1891, and 1893; Hill-Tout in *Ethnol. Surv. Can.* for B. A. A. S., 1899, 1900, and 1902. Hill-Tout in *Jour. Anthropol. Inst.*, Jan.-June, 1904; Teit in *Memoirs Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, 11, pp. 289-296; Gibbs in *Cont. N. A. Ethnol.*, 1, pp. 184-186.

⁵ Morice in *Proc. Can. Inst. for 1888-89*, pp. 121, 126; *Trans. Roy. Soc. Can. for 1892*, sec. 11, p. 117.

Kutenai,¹ the Nootka,² the rest of the people of Washington,³ Oregon,³ and California³ excepting the Yuman tribes already referred to, the Arapaho,⁴ Kiowa,⁵ Crows,⁶ Cheyenne,⁶ and the tribes of the Caddoan stock outside of the Caddo confederacy.⁷ To these may be added the Eskimo⁸ and Aleut, and probably the Cree, the Algonquian bands east of Hudson bay, the Khotana of the lower Yukon, and the Pima tribes.⁹ In the extent of country which it covers and the importance of some of the stocks involved, it will be seen that this system—or lack of system,—compares very favorably with either of those already considered.

Thus on purely quantitative grounds a study of the tribes north of Mexico lends no overwhelming support to the theory of a primitively universal maternal clan system. But when we come to compare the tribes in which a clan system exists individually with those which are without it, the tenuous character of its foundations becomes painfully manifest. For, granting its truth, we are compelled to assume the inferiority of the tribes constituting the Iroquois and Creek confederacies, the Timucua of Florida, and the Natchez of Louisiana and Mississippi to the Cree and Eskimo; of the Pueblos and Navaho to the Paiute and the tribes of California; and of the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian to the Salishan and eastern Athapaskan tribes.

Instead of being primitive, a study of the north Pacific area convinces one that the maternal clan system is itself evolved, for there

¹ Chamberlain in *Rep. on N. W. Tribes of Can. for B. A. A. S.*, 1892, p. 12.

² Boas in *Rep. on N. W. Tribes of Can. for B. A. A. S.* for 1890, pp. 32, 33, 43.

³ Gibbs in *Cont. N. A. Ethnol.*, I, pp. 184-186; Farrand in *American Anthropologist*, III, p. 242; Goddard, *Life and Culture of the Hupa*, Univ. Cal. Publ., Am. Arch. and Eth., I, p. 58; Kroeber, *Types of Indian Culture in California*, *ibid.*, II, pp. 83, 84, 87; Dixon, *Northern Maidu*, in *Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, XVII, p. 223.

⁴ Mooney in *Fourteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 956; Kroeber, *The Arapaho*, *Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, XVIII, p. 8.

⁵ Mooney in *Seventeenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 227.

⁶ See above.

⁷ Personal information.

⁸ Boas in *Sixth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, pp. 578-582; Turner in *Eleventh Report Bur. Am. Ethnol.*, p. 190. The totemism referred to by Nelson in *Eighteenth Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.* is plainly not coupled with a true clan or gentile system, and is quite certainly due to the influence of more southerly tribes.

⁹ Shown by investigations of Russell, as yet unpublished.

is every indication that it there grew up in one small area at the mouths of the Nass and Skeena rivers and was spreading northward, southward, and inland at the time these tribes first came to the notice of Europeans. That an evolution has taken place in the Southwest is indicated by Fewkes' study of Hopi clans, as well as by everything that we have learned of the relation of Navaho culture to that of the Pueblos. It is also evident that the type of the social organization has some relation to environment, typical clan systems being found usually in the maize country, although the north Pacific coast presents an exception, while the loose type is found principally in cold northern regions and the barren western plateau where food is scarce. Yet here again California and the coast region of Oregon, Washington, and southern British Columbia must be excepted.

An interesting point to be noted is the position of gentile areas relative to the two others. Unless we except the Blackfeet it will be seen that each of these touches on regions occupied by tribes in the two remaining categories. Thus the Sioux-Algonquian area lies between the Iroquois and Muskhogean tribes on one side and the Shoshonean, Salishan, and eastern Athapascan tribes on the other; the Yuman tribes lie between the Navaho and the Piman and Shoshonean tribes; and the Kwakiutl are between the maternally organized Heiltsuk and the Nootka and Salish. This association suggests at once whether the evolution of the gentile system and the evolution of the clan system have borne any peculiar relation to each other. In the case of the Kwakiutl we know that the organization contains elements probably borrowed from their northern neighbors, and it is believed that their relatives on the north, the Heiltsuk, have changed to a maternal form of organization through the influence of the maternally organized Tsimshian and Haida. Supposing the same influence to continue, we might expect that the Kwakiutl, in time, would also have reached a maternal stage. In other words, the curious phenomenon here presents itself of a loosely organized tribe changing to a gentile and afterward to a clan system. At the same time the Kwakiutl gentile system can hardly be regarded as typical, and I should be inclined to doubt whether a gentile system that had attained the perfection of that of the Omaha,

for instance, would pass over naturally into a clan system. This possibility ought to be reckoned with, however, in dealing with those "traces of a maternal stage" that we hear so much about. It might put quite a different interpretation on several conclusions arrived at by Morgan.

A thorough investigation of this problem demands an examination of certain tendencies among tribes in the last category. The relative proportion of cases in which a man goes to live with his wife's people to those in which a woman goes to live with those of her husband ought to be noted, also the attitude of the members of a band toward marriage within and marriage outside, and toward marriage among foreign tribes. The treatment of tribes or bands adopted into others or becoming allied to others ought also to be examined, as well as tendencies of a band or tribe to segregate, and the attitude of these parts toward each other and of other bands toward all.

The totemic side of the question, on the other hand, requires close investigation of the religious beliefs of primitive people and especially of the related phenomena presented by the personal manitu, the crest of the Northwest coast, the so-called "suliaism" of Salish tribes,¹ and the heraldry of the tribes of the plains. It appears to be rather a badge or "medicine" affixed to bands which have become differentiated regardless of it than an essential element of clan or gentile organization.

More care should be exercised by sociologists in picking out "vestigial characters." Doubtless such exist, but in determining what they are we must first be certain that they have no meaning or function for the present generation, and secondly that, instead of vestiges, they are not rather tendencies toward something still in the future. Thus the application of the term "wife" to a wife's sister, or of "husband" to a sister's husband is not a "vestigial character" as has been maintained, but indicates the potential relationship in which the parties stand, a man having a prior claim on his wife's sister in case of his wife's death. Other so-called "vestigial characters" are of much the same order.

While this field presents abundant opportunities for future

¹ Hill-Tout, *op. cit.*

investigation, it would seem to the writer, from the evidence already adduced, that the primitive nature of the maternal clan is not substantiated by a study of the American tribes north of Mexico, and can be proved only by presenting more abundant proof from other quarters of the globe.

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